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### Widening the Scope

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Liesbeth Korthals Altes

## **Widening the Scope: The Fact/Fiction Distinction Revisited**

Françoise Lavocat: *Fait et Fiction. Pour une frontière*. Paris: Seuil 2016. 618 pp. EUR 33.00. ISBN 978-2-0212-4271-3

Have the boundaries between fact and fiction become obsolete in (post-)post-modern societies, as is often claimed? In *Fait et Fiction. Pour une frontière* (Seuil, 2016) Françoise Lavocat, professor of Comparative Literature at the Université Paris 3-Sorbonne nouvelle, pulls apart such hasty generalisations. She admits that the blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction is increasingly widespread, in the arts but also in the non-fiction genres par excellence, journalism and documentary; cyberculture allows people's fictional avatars to become more real than their realtime personalities, while 'postmodern' thinking has given its blessing to the dismissal of factuality, finding fiction everywhere, even in our rapport with reality, ourselves, or history. But, she argues, our pleasure or anger at boundary blurring practices already shows that frontiers between the two realms are very much alive. Moreover, how cogent are the arguments of panfictionalists really? Adopting a "moderate differentialism", the author sets out to demonstrate "the existence and the cognitive, conceptual and political necessity of the frontiers of fiction" (p. 12).<sup>1</sup>

While her own understanding of fiction converges to some extent with philosophical and pragmatic definition of fiction as make-believe (Kendall Walton 1990) or as shared ludic pretense (Jean-Marie Schaeffer 1999), Lavocat defends the need for an ontological definition, as issues of modes of existence cannot but play a central role in any distinction of fiction. Fiction, she proposes, is a "cultural artefact produced through an act of imagination, and which is not submitted to the conditions of vericonditionality determined by reference to the empirical world" (p. 33). This definition should be sufficiently broad yet sufficiently precise to allow the analysis of and reflection on the variegated relations between fact and fiction across times, places and cultures, which her book aims to do, focusing on questions such as: what arguments are invoked to declare the frontiers between fact and fiction obsolete? What is meant by fiction in such debates? How can fiction and its hybridisations with factuality be most productively theorised? What would be the conditions for what she calls a 'culture of fiction'? This ambitious task is approached through a correspondingly broad historical, crosscultural and multimedial framework, which draws on analytic philosophy, anthropology, narrative theory, law, linguistics, pragmatics, psychoanalysis and cognitive sciences. The analyses are richly supported by examples

ranging from French and, more broadly, Western, literary fiction, to excursions into Antiquity, ancient and contemporary Japan and China, and to film, contemporary popular art and virtual reality practices.

The book is comprised of three parts. The first part, “Monisms and dualisms”, opens with a brief overview of the history and theories of fiction, followed by the analysis of three fairly recent debates – within narrative theory, historiography, and psychoanalysis and avant-garde culture in France respectively – in which the distinction of fiction was contested. In a pattern that recurs throughout the book, these analyses are shot through with historical and cross-cultural excursions, which often offer a counterpoint or corrective to the foregrounded theories of fiction. Lavocat characterises the history of fiction as the constant oscillation and varying “cohabitation” between negatively and positively connoted conceptions of fiction that have been with us since Ancient Greece, which she traces in a number of historical and contemporary theories of fiction: fiction as deceit (*pseudo*) versus fiction as creative invention, as simulation that does not seek to deceive (*plasma*; the Greek terms are borrowed from the classicist Barbara Cassin; cf. p. 20).

Lavocat then reconstructs the “genealogy” that leads from narratological theories of fiction developed from the sixties onward, which she labels as predominantly “differentialist” or “dualist,” to the currently more popular “monist”, even panfictionalist, theories of storytelling. Early narratologists, she argues, tended to privilege literary fictional texts. They also implicitly assumed the distinction of literary fiction from nonliterary and nonfictional texts, with the exception of Käte Hamburger, with her pioneering *Die Logik der Dichtung* (1957), and more recently, Dorrit Cohn, with *The Distinction of Fiction* (1999). Both works studied formal markers of fictionality, such as the use of past tense, third person perspective, or temporal and other deictic shifts (cf. p. 34f.). In the seventies, this “differentialist” research was supplanted under the sway of pragmatics. Searle’s rejection of text-internal criteria for distinguishing fictionality, in favour of text-external signals, in particular had a strong impact also on literary scholars. Theories of storytelling originating from pragmatics became increasingly popular as of the eighties also within literary studies. While they mainly focused on factual narratives, it was mostly assumed that there was continuity between literary and everyday narratives, which explains Lavocat’s characterisation of storytelling theories as panfictionalist or “monist”: all stories are basically fictional, in the sense that they are crafted and express subjective viewpoints (not a sin, in post-modern times). In fact, she notes, both narratological and storytelling approaches tend to unduly generalise one particular understanding of fiction on the basis of their privileged corpus, and to elude the question whether fiction in a stricter sense has any formal specificity and relevance – a bias that seriously compromises their theoretical and analytic potential.

Having thus set the stage, Lavocat examines the erosion of the distinction of fact and fiction in historiography and psychoanalysis: the realms of our shared past, and that of our selves. She exposes (sometimes quite scathingly, cf. for

instance her comments on Barthes, p. 59) the normative assumptions in scholars' argumentations and the dead ends to which they lead, concentrating on Roland Barthes, Hayden White, Paul Ricœur, Paul Veyne, taken to represent post-modern thinking and its critique of 'truth' and 'facts'. In their different ways, these scholars exposed history as a fictional, subjective and value-laden narrativisation, if only by its emplotment and the literary devices deployed to mimetic effect. Reality – and history – soon took revenge: Lavocat shows how their principled skepticism as to the possibility of knowing the past and its 'facts' made it impossible for these historians to confront historical revisionism without logical contradiction. In fact, as she wryly notes, these same sceptics hastened to rule that historians should commit themselves to ethical imperatives of memory, which sit uneasily with their 'panfictionalist' claims. In her analysis, Veyne went furthest in his lucid self-critique, explicitly distancing himself from his own relativist positions, and more generally, from a 'linguistic turn' that fostered existential duplicity as it allowed epistemological skepticism to cohabit with all but skeptical ethical existential and political position takings (pp. 94-96). Lavocat's emphasis on Veyne, who is probably less known outside France than the other three scholars she singles out, sounds a note that is perceptible throughout her book: that of a commitment to intellectual honesty and rigour, in contrast to forms of scholarship that swim with the tide. One might feel, however, that in her focus on argumentative rigour Lavocat loses sight of the contextual timeliness of these strongly voiced critiques in a period in which historiography was dominated by a positivist doxa. Ricœur's main interest in rethinking historiography, for instance, was perhaps less the logical and epistemological status of historical referentiality, but rather, as befits a hermeneutic approach, meaning making and its ethical and existential motivations. Lavocat discusses Ricœur's ethical interest in the last section of her chapter, but mainly as a logical inconsistency revealing the deficiencies of the panfictionalism she attributes to him.

While White or Ricœur still endowed history-as-fiction with the power to construct meaning, Lacanian psychoanalysis, hugely popular among the French intellectual and artistic avant-garde in the sixties and seventies, turned the impossibility to reach "the real" into a fundamental lack at the heart of our selves, a lack that became the source of a haunting desire (cf. chapter III). Jacques Lacan's famous phrase: "The real, that is the impossible" (*Le réel, c'est l'impossible*, quoted p. 120) captures the idea that language, our biased perceptions and fabulating psyche weave webs of fictions in which we live and which constitute us, forever separating us from reality. In contrast to the playfulness of some of Barthes' or White's writings, this anguished panfictionalism once again negatively connotes fiction as deceit, setting for psychoanalysis – but also for writers and artists – the ethical if not political task to unmask fiction at the heart of what is perceived as reality. Lavocat shows how *Tel Quel*, the avant-garde movement lead by Philippe Sollers and Julia Kristeva, seized upon amongst others Lacan's ideas, denouncing any form of literature that aimed at a 'realist' evocation of reality. The good old Balzacian novel, with its mimetic characters, descriptions

and plots, became the epitome of fiction's deceptive realism and immersive appeal. But fiction – in the restricted sense of literary/artistic fiction – also held the cure: by thematising fiction as a lie, the experimental 'new novel' would make its readers experience the real as precisely that which is unattainable (Romantic irony is in the air). But in this metafictional salvation move, the issue of fictionality itself – why do we cultivate such fictional or metafictional artefacts? – was again evacuated.

The book's first part, with its critique of 'panfictionalist' positions, ends with a chapter on developmental psychology, cognitive sciences and AI research, from which empirically grounded insights about the distinction between fact and fiction might be expected. Alas, Lavocat shows, not only are the empirical experiments that test claims about uses of fiction often too limited to be conclusive, the little evidence they offer works sometimes in support of monist ('all is fiction') and sometimes of dualist positions ('fact and fiction can and should be distinguished'). Thus, some experiments suggest that the neuronal processes involved in the reading of factual or fictional texts appear to be the same, and research on emotion and the modelling of beliefs tends to tone down the frontier between fact and fiction, or to conceive of them as set on a continuum. Yet other studies in developmental psychology and cognitive sciences suggest that the capacity to discriminate between real and imagined is an important threshold in child development, and that our engagement in fictional works produces a cognitive shift that limits our tendency to action and our 'self memory', making us rely on a semantic memory instead. The latter findings, however inconclusive yet, unsurprisingly found their way into Lavocat's own ontological definition of fiction, as we will see in the discussion of Part III.

In the second part of the book, "Cultures and Beliefs", Lavocat explores the anthropological limits and the societal, institutional and media-technological conditions of what she labels "cultures of fictionality". A core question at the opening of this second part is indeed whether all cultures have fiction. If one understands fiction in the broad sense of storytelling, this is probably the case. If, however, one understands fiction more narrowly as the production of – and pleasure in – representations of state of affairs that one knows not to exist, then the idea that fiction is an invention of (Western) modernity seems more plausible, Lavocat suggests, before correcting that idea by an elaborate discussion of *The Tale of Genji*, a Japanese literary classic from around the year 1000. This work, with its – to a contemporary Western reader – somewhat labyrinthine court intrigues and settings, has one chapter that ever so clearly and playfully stages a reflection on the uses and powers of fiction, which seems to pass under review most theories of fiction articulated from Plato to now. While one early occurrence of metafictional reflection does not allow to conclude that fiction is of all times and places, it does suggest hypotheses about the economic, political and religious conditions under which a "culture of fiction" can flourish, which Lavocat summarises as: leisure and sophistication, a societal system that values and protects imagination and reflection on the nature of reality, and a smooth circulation between the sacred and the profane (pp. 200f.). In contrast, Lavocat

discusses the case of the Amerindian Kuna tribe studied by the anthropologist Carlo Severi, a culture without fiction – which, according to Lavocat, consequently cannot but be a culture without factuality. While they may not (or not yet) be scientifically conclusive, such suggestive anthropological reflections make us reconsider more narrow and culture bound notions and practices of fiction. One critical note, in passing: this chapter shows a risk occasionally incurred by Lavocat's broad explorations. Between the captivating discussions of *The Tale of Genji* and the Kuna's mythologising attitude to real events, readers are taken to revisit in two or three pages the poesis/mimesis couple set in place in Ancient Greece, revised through the anthropological, historical and philosophical lenses of contemporary scholars such as Claude Calame, Jean-Marie Schaeffer and Jacques Rancière. Sometimes 'less is more'.

Intersections of beliefs held in imaginary worlds and in the real world are examined in the following chapters, which zoom in on the limits set to fiction by institutionalised religion and law. Lavocat reminds us that with respect to beliefs, reality cannot be constructed as the opposite to fiction, as has also been argued by analytic philosophers, such as Henry Price and Hilary Putnam: what we take to be the case and true often relies on unchecked evidence, and speakers compensate their limited knowledge by relying on knowledge accumulated in their community (cf. p. 221). Precisely the engagement with fiction (in Lavocat's restricted sense) can make one realise the fragility of beliefs on which one's conduct and judgment rest, constituting an exercise in freedom – a motive that runs through various chapters. The author also reminds us that fiction requires disbelief (awareness of the fact that one engages in an ontologically separate world) as much as belief (immersion in fictional worlds, engagement with characters). Any theory downplaying this oscillation cannot but be reductive, as would be the case with Coleridge's 'willing suspension of disbelief'. These insights are not in themselves new, but Lavocat examines such tensions through fresh conceptual, historically and crossculturally comparative perspectives, illustrating them with examples ranging from debates occasioned by religious counterfactual fiction and works perceived as blasphemy in 17<sup>th</sup> century France, to contemporary popular culture, such as *The Matrix*, Jerry Springer's *The Opera* and Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*.

The exposure of the doxa in fiction raises the question of the juridical context in which fiction operates. In particularly interesting sections, Lavocat discusses cases in which fiction comes too close to reality, by portraying existing people or situations, for instance, and analyses virtual reality (VR) as a lawless space. VR worlds not only raise new problems regarding authorship and copyright. They also elicit perplexity as to their status: in the legislation concerning VR, Lavocat also shows how VR practices and representations are sometimes treated as reality, sometimes as fiction/art, benefiting from the right to (moral) transgression conventionally granted to art in modernity while offering very real platforms for sexual abuse, paedophilia and violence on avatars, with often very real effects on real people. The production and distribution of VR have also become fiscal par-

adises and privileged means for whitewashing suspect fortunes, while fictive currencies used in many a game make a lot of real money change pockets. The often hesitant and variegated legislation on such thorny issues makes the call for a new conceptual framework even more relevant.

As a contribution to such a conceptual framework, Lavocat then seeks to specify criteria for discriminating between virtuality, fictionality and reality in the digital age. This exploration takes the author deep into cyberculture. Most interesting to Lavocat's argument are the digital entertainment and/or art practices that make players imagine worlds, and which hence might qualify as fiction in Lavocat's sense, such as virtual social worlds or the Metaverse, massive multi-player online games (MMOGs), IRL (in real life), or videogames. Do these variously hybrid practices deal the final blow to the traditional fiction/fact distinction and, uncannily, to the 'realness' of real experience? Lavocat dedramatizes such questions, setting out to disentangle the factual and fictional strands in these practices and in people's engagement with them, with particularly rich pages on the reference to existing places in VR games (cf. pp. 318-323). While she acknowledges how very real the sensory appeal of such games may be, and how an avatar, for instance, can absorb our actual daily life, Lavocat is not prepared to relinquish the distinction of fiction. Even the increasing trend in videogames to create full-fledged worlds, with a plot, characters one can empathise with, and moral dimensions, only proves the persisting attraction of fiction, she maintains (p. 344). In these games the interest and effort in worldmaking or empathising are usually less intense than the involvement in the action required from the player (cf. p. 339). The differences between (traditional) fiction and games remain fundamental, she concludes. They are alethic (the distribution of what is or can be the case is not the same: in a virtual world, one can change a state of affairs, in fiction – except if it is of an experimental kind – one cannot), deontic (the rules of the game are imposed, the world of fiction is proposed), axiological (games are usually indifferent to moral norms, or at least these do not form a core part of the experience, as they do in fiction), epistemic (to engage with fiction requires other types of knowledge and skills than games), and pragmatic (fiction refers to a world on the 'as if' mode, games require action upon the proposed virtual world; cf. pp. 343f.).

Part II's reflection on fiction as a highly sensitive and versatile platform on which imagination encounters and confronts reality appropriately concludes with a reflection on character, a privileged hinge between real and fictional worlds as they elicit real emotions as well as responses of identification, empathy or dislike. Arguing that empirical psychology and cognitive sciences cannot be ignored if one wishes to understand the engagement with fictional or factual practices, Lavocat draws on research on empathy and identification (in particular on Suzanne Keen's work) to conclude, once again, that the specificity of emotional and moral responses to fiction is beyond doubt (cf. pp. 354-358). It resides in the relaxation of evaluation, suspension of self-centredness, and inhibition of action (cf. p. 363). This emphasis on the ontological distinction of fiction from ludic virtual reality practices is consistent with Lavocat's understanding of fiction

as a cognitive and pragmatic shift, which allows engagement but inhibits action, discussed at the end of Part I.

The title of the third part, “D’un monde l’autre” (literally: From one world, the other) is not easy to translate. Its unconventional elliptic syntax suggests the instability of the rapports between one world and another. Thus, the title highlights a core theme of Lavocat’s book: not just the notion of worlds, central in Lavocat’s ontological approach, but also the constitutive ontological hybridity of fiction. In this last part Lavocat further defends and develops her own ontological perspective, building mainly on possible worlds theory (PWT), which she helped finetune and spread among the Francophone public (cf. for instance Lavocat 2010). Ontology may not be fashionable nowadays, as pragmatic methods and cultural critique hold sway; it may be associated with essentialist (‘metaphysical’), anticonstructivist and antirelativist positions considered outdated; still, Lavocat argues, one cannot conceptualise ‘fiction’ – and a fortiori its hybridisations with factuality – without using ontological concepts, such as worldmaking and modes of existence or of reference. Anxieties about the ‘realness of reality’ and the status of the human, in response to the explosion of virtual reality, moreover make precise ontological analyses existentially relevant. Taking her distance from philosophical simulation theories of fiction and from a pragmatic approach which foreground or assume the ontological autonomy of fictional worlds (Lavocat mainly refers to Walton, Searle, Currie, and Schaeffer), Lavocat finds in PWT a theoretical and analytic framework that allows to conceptualise the hybrid status of fiction and to analyse degrees of fictionality. This means, however, getting rid of a number of unhelpful linguistic and logical constraints initially stipulated by PWT, such as its focus on propositions and its requirements of completion and noncontradiction: not only can fictions evoke worlds through other than linguistic means; these worlds are incomplete, ontologically heterogeneous, and paradoxical by constitution, not by error or failure. Drawing on the work of among others Thomas Pavel, Lubomír Doležel, Marie-Laure Ryan and Brian McHale, Lavocat shows that fictional worlds are indeed composed of different modalities, some of these real, others fictional or virtual (pp. 396f.); they also combine heterogeneous modes of reference (extrafictional, interfictional and intrafictional).

In a following chapter, Lavocat addresses the role of ontological paradoxes in fiction. Not only do fictions provoke real emotions – a central and famous ‘paradox of fiction’ –, they often exploit (onto)logical “impossibilities”, such as being told by impossible narrators (a dead person, an animal, a thing), narrating information that cannot possibly be known (people’s thoughts) or experiences that are physically unfeasible, such as time travelling (Lavocat draws on the work of amongst others Olivier Caïra 2011, but research under the flag of Unnatural Narratology also comes to mind; cf. for instance Jan Alber 2018). The greatest paradox, meanwhile, may be that those who engage in such fictions are often hardly unsettled by such paradoxes; rather, Lavocat proposes, these are important triggers for interpretive activity; and of course, habituation may occur. Ontological instability and paradoxes may precisely be the source of the pleasure



people take in fiction, the author suggests: we are challenged to actively cooperate and to ‘repair’, as it were, an imagined world’s impossibilities and contradictions through our interpretive strategies (cf. p. 533; Lavocat’s analysis recalls Tamar Yacobi’s fine analysis of the coping strategies readers develop in response to unreliable narration; cf. for instance Yacobi 1981).

The heterogeneity and paradoxes of fiction culminate in the device of metalepsis, which Lavocat makes the object of the concluding chapter. In its original coinage by Genette in *Figures III*, metalepsis was defined as the “passage from one narrative level to another” (Genette 1972, 244f., cited in Lavocat, p. 474). The games which such passages play “manifest through the intensity of their effects the importance of the limit that they endeavour to transgress regardless of verisimilitude [...]; the mobile but sacred frontier between two worlds: the one in which one narrates, the one that one narrates.” (Genette, *ibid.*, cited by Lavocat, p. 475)

However, as Lavocat shows, referring amongst others to the volume on metalepsis edited by John Pier and Jean-Marie Schaeffer (2005), this firm sense of a frontier is undermined or abandoned in later theories, in particular with the displacement of scholarly interest from the (intrafictional) levels of discourse, or rhetorical metalepsis (Ryan 2005, 207), to relations between worlds or ontological metalepsis (*ibid.*) which would blur the frontier between fact and fiction by realising their “interpenetration” and “contamination” (*ibid.*, discussed in Lavocat, p. 479). The popularity of such ontological or “literal” metalepses is indeed demonstrated not just in literature, theatre and film, with classics such as John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) or *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), but also in graphic novels or videogames – works in which characters meet their creators, readers are drawn into the fictional world, or other uncanny or jubilatory border crossings. But the popularity of such transgression of frontiers does not justify theoretical claims about a fusion of worlds: metalepsis precisely confirms the frontier it plays with. “The favor enjoyed by the hypothesis of a fusion of worlds operated by metalepsis can only be explained by an influence of fiction [itself] on theory or by the adoption of postulates that implicitly pertain not so much to fiction, but to reality itself”, Lavocat finely observes (p. 480). Thus, this last chapter elegantly brings to conclusion Lavocat’s argument in favour of the distinction of fiction.

Lavocat’s book is a significant contribution to the currently flourishing discussion on the rapport between fact and fiction. It should work as an effective antidote to overgeneralising theoretical or culture analytic claims and theoretical provincialisms. Its broad historical and analytic scope brings home the variety, complexity and fragility of the articulations between real and imagined worlds, not just in Western contemporary society, but across time, places, and media. Lavocat’s emphasis on fiction as a fundamentally hybrid, multimodal practice opens up important avenues for research. If we want to handle, for real, the complexities of our world, including the dizzying possibilities opened up by cyberculture, we need to develop both clear and subtle criteria to distinguish fact

and fiction, in full acknowledgment of their actual hybridisations. Clearly, such an ambitiously broad and multidisciplinary undertaking cannot but raise questions and critiques. For instance, in light of Lavocat's insistence on conceptual matters, the often unreflected extension of her core notions of 'fact' and 'fiction' to other terms, such as 'the real', 'reality', 'factuality', and, on the other side, '(works of) imagination', 'imaginary', or 'belief' is surprising, as is the lack of explicit reflection on the association of fiction with art. The author might also have made more explicit the ways in which the adopted ontological perspective relates to a pragmatic approach. In particular, the importance of communication contracts and the role of interpretation as well as of underlying framing acts would have deserved more detailed discussion. These dimensions seem deeply compatible with Lavocat's interest in historical and crosscultural contextualisation and in cognitive sciences; they might also have both challenged and enriched the adopted ontological perspective. But this is definitely a work that should be translated into English (and, why not, into Japanese and Chinese), with the additional benefit that it would help spread relevant Francophone work on fiction and narrative. A translation could be an occasion to reconsider the book's form: dividing the original's material into two or even three volumes might make it more accessible to readers. With all the pages it devotes to fiction, this book is very much also a defence of 'reality': a commitment to a rigorous shared assessment of 'what is', and to reason, logic, science as indispensable tools. Fiction, the arts, games, as practices that keep us flexible and alert, is the more passionately defended as it works in tandem with that commitment to knowing 'the real'.

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<sup>1</sup> Translations from the French are mine (LKA); page indications refer to the book under review.